Reviewer’s report

Title: Strengthening Capacity to Use Research Evidence in Health Sector Policy-Making: Experience from Kenya and Malawi

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Reviewer: Irene Agyepong

Reviewer's report:

Under the introduction, on page 6 - 9 a lot of information is presented about the EIPM landscape in Kenya and Malawi. It looks to me like this information was from data collected as part of this effort. It is explicitly stated in line 118 page 6 that capacity needs assessment was conducted at the start of the project. However we are not told how the data was collected and analysed to enable an opinion as to the "quality" of the information as empirical data. The whole section therefore has to be treated as "opinion" rather than fact /empirical data. If these information and the methods by which they were obtained are published already then a reference must be provided to the publication. If they are not published then I think they should be presented as part of this study's findings and the methodology by which the findings were generated should be described as part of methodology.

Some of the information looks like it is perhaps coming from a desk review, but there are no references.

The description of the intervention (page 8 onwards) is very long. It can be made more crisp, focused and concise. Was the intervention developed out of the baseline, refined based on the baseline or was it already in existence. Not very clear. Again explicitly surfacing your theoretical framework may help you do this. Also it is not clear if part of the research was the development and refining /improvement of the intervention or the intervention was developed and then evaluated. My sense is that this was an evaluation of an intervention to strengthen individual and institutional capacity in MOH to use research evidence in health policy.

Some of the definitions of key concepts are not provided or vague. For example what competencies of civil servants were improved.

The whole long section on EIPM landscape in Kenya and Malawi (page 6 onwards) looks to me like some of the findings of your study rather than part of the introduction.
Section 2.3 (page 14 onwards) looks to me like this is the actual description of the evaluation methodology. It is sketchy. Exactly what data was collected by the needs assessment. What methodology was used. Since you draw on that data you need to provide an understanding of the methods to enable a reader to make a judgement about the quality of your data and the validity of your conclusions.

It seems to me the section you have labelled challenges faced during project implementation is actually related to contextual issues in capacity building. These to me are all part of findings and a very important part of trying to understand how and why the intervention worked (or not)

Page 21 Effect of interventions on individual capacity
"as show in table 3, the average ratings for research use skills among Kenya…" What do these ratings mean? How were they defined and measured?

Page 25 "Even though the assessment done before the intervention did not take a comprehensive political economy analysis…". Why did you not do this since you recognize it was important? The information you provided earlier on about challenges actually moves towards this kind of analysis. However it seems to me that instead of seeing this information as some of your research data, they are simply seen as "challenges"

The discussion is weak. It will be greatly improved by stronger conceptual thinking.

General
This paper generally suffers from a difficulty in separating descriptive project implementation report approaches from analytical evaluation research approaches.

Paper is currently too descriptive and not critically analytic enough. I am missing an explicit presentation of the theoretical constructs /concepts /frameworks related to how you conceptualized and therefore researched and described and analyzed capacity. It is implicit in the document but your thinking needs to be clearly and explicitly surfaced. This will help you to make the paper more critically analytical
The paper has potential to contribute to the literature. However, as it is currently written, I am not sure what the background of the authors are and their Health Policy and Systems theoretical and analytical skills. They may either need to draw better on those skills if they have them or seek support from a senior researcher with those skills who can support them. Having such an outsider who was not part of the project team may also strengthen the ability to stand back and look at the data as research.

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An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English
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